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ON THE ALTERNATION BETWEEN INFLECTIONAL CASE AND PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN ROMANIAN

ALEXANDRU MARDALE

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to examine the alternation between nominal expressions marked with morphological case (e.g. *fiul regelui “the king’s son”) and certain prepositional phrases (e.g. *fiul de rege “the royal son”) in Romanian. We will show that the two types of constructions are alike insofar as they involve a relation which may either pertain to the lexical meaning of the head N or else be contextually triggered by the presence of the second argument. We will also observe that they differ regarding the nature of the second argument: a strong correlation can be shown to exist between syntactic categories (DPs vs. NPs), Case marking (morphological vs. prepositional) and semantic type (individuals vs. properties).

KEYWORDS

(inflectional/morphological) case, preposition(s), entity, property

1 Introduction

1.1 What is case?

Traditionally, *case* is a morphological notion that refers to an inflectional morpheme occurring on N(oun)s or on other constituents of the N(oun) P(hrase) / D(eterminer) P(hrase) (e.g., D, A(djectives), Quant(fiers), Num(erals)).

For instance, in English and French, the inflectional morpheme varies with the position of the (pro)noun in the sentence. As shown in the following examples, the pronoun is Nominative when preverbal (i.e. Subject) and it is Accusative when postverbal or postNominative (i.e. Direct Object):

(1) a. John loves Mary. (English)
   b. He\textsubscript{Nom} loves he\textsubscript{Acc}.
   c. *He\textsubscript{Acc} loves he\textsubscript{Nom}.
(2) a. Jean regarde Marie. (French)
   b. Il\textsubscript{Nom} la\textsubscript{Acc} regarde.
   c. *La\textsubscript{Acc} regarde il\textsubscript{Nom}.

On the contrary, in languages like Russian, the inflectional morpheme attaches to all NPs / DPs (and their constituents) in the sentence (apud Matushansky (2007)):

(3) \textbf{Eta talantlivaja studentka znaet dvux lingvistov.} (Russian)
    this\textsubscript{Nom} talented\textsubscript{Nom} student\textsubscript{Nom} knows two\textsubscript{Acc} linguists\textsubscript{Acc}
    This talented student knows two linguists.

more specific notion that refers to a theory dealing with the assignation of the so-called abstract case.

Abstract case is a (syntactic) property of nominal expressions that reflects their relation with a Specifier or with some Head. Abstract case may (or may not) have a morphological (i.e., inflectional) realization.

In other words, morphological case is an overt realization of abstract case. The following examples from Latin illustrate this possibility:

(4) a. Pater filium amat.
   father_Nom, son_Acc loves
   The father loves his son.
   b. Patrem filius amat.
   father_Acc, son_Nom loves
   The son loves his father.

1.2 A few remarks about case in Romanian

Romanian is a Romance language which partially inherits morphological cases from Latin, namely the Dative case and the Genitive case which are homonymous.

Dative is assigned in verbal constructions (5), while Genitive is assigned in nominal constructions (6):

(5) am dat (cărții) regelui
   have give_PastPart books king-the_Dat
   I gave (some books) to the king.
(6) cărțile regelui
    books-the king-the_Gen
    The king’s books.

The difference between Dative and Genitive is visible when substituting by a (personal / possessive) pronoun as in the examples below:

(7) i-am dat (cărții) lui / *sale
   him_CL-have give_PastPart (books) he_Dat / he_Gen
   I gave him (some books).
(8) cărțile lui / sale
    books-the he_Gen / he_Gen
    His books.

Nominative and Accusative are also homonymous, but – unlike Dative and / or Genitive – they do not have a morphologically marked form (see (9) – (10) below), with the exception of certain forms of the personal pronouns in Accusative. The latter situation is illustrated in (11):

(9) Studentul vizitează profesorul.
    Student-the_Nom visits professor-the_Acc
    The student is visiting the teacher.
(10) Profesorul vizitează studentul.
     professor-the_Nom visits student-the_Acc
     The teacher is visiting the student.
(11) a. Tu / *tine vii la conferință. (Nominative)
youNom youAcc come to conference
You are coming to the conference.
b. Vin la conferință cu tine / *tu. (Accusative)
来 to conference with youAcc youNom
I am coming to the conference with you.

In what follows, this paper focuses exclusively on the analysis of Dative and Genitive.

1.3 The puzzle

Among its morphological case paradigm, Romanian displays a remarkable alternation between nominal expressions marked for Dative or Genitive and P(prepositional) P(phrase)s headed by one of the functional prepositions a, de or la.

This phenomenon appears systematically in the case of Genitive which alternates with PPs headed by the preposition de. This can be seen in the following examples:

(12) a. aceasta este camera oaspeților de la nunta Mariei (Genitive)
this is room-the guests-theGen of at marriage-the MaryGen
This is the room of the guests from Mary’s marriage.
b. aceasta este camera de oaspeți la care am visat întotdeauna
this is room-the DE guests to which have dreamPastPart always
This is the guests’ room which I always dreamed of.

The above-mentionned alternation is nevertheless much more restricted in the case of Genitive which alternates with PPs headed by the preposition a (see the constructions in (13) below), or in the case of Dative which alternates with PPs headed by the preposition la (see the constructions in (14)):

(13) a. deportarea evreilor / *a evrei (Genitive)
deportation-the Jews-theGen A Jews
The deportation of the Jews.
b. deportarea a zece evrei / *zecilor evrei
deportation-the A ten Jews ten-theGen Jews
The deportation of ten Jews.
(14) a. s-a adresat participanților / ??la participanți (Dative)
SRefIn has addressPastPart participants-theDat LA participants
(S)he addressed to the participants.
b. s-a adresat la cinci participanți / *cincilor participanți
SRefIn has addressPastPart LA five participants five-theDat participants
(S)he has addressed to five participants.

The goal of the next paragraphs is to discuss the conditions under which these alternances occur in Romanian, on the one hand, and to propose an analysis for each of these constructions, on the other hand.
2 Case-marking and prepositional-marking of DPs

2.1 DPs marked for Genitive and PPs headed by a

As shown in (13) above, adnominal constituents marked with morphological Genitive may alternate with PPs headed by the functional preposition a. Note that this alternation is not free, but it is constrained by the form of the first constituent in the DP as follows:

(i) if the first constituent of the DP is invariable (i.e., cannot take the inflectional morphemes), a-marking is obligatory. The next paradigm illustrates some cases of invariables constituents that trigger obligatorily prepositional marking: numerals (15a), the universal quantifier tot ‘whole’ (15b), the pronoun ceea ce ‘what’ (15c):

(15)  

a. familile a doi elevi
     families-the A two pupils
     The families of two pupils.

b. adunarea a tot satul
   assembly-the A whole village-the
   The assembly of the whole village.

c. consecința a ceea ce s-a spus mai devreme
   consequence-the A what seRef*has sayPastPart more early
   The consequence of what has been said earlier.

NB! It is important to point out that the case of the constituent preceded by a is a default case which is generally associated to Accusative:

(15')  

a. adunarea a tot satul
   assembly-the A wholeAcc village-the
   The assembly of the whole village.

b. *adunarea a totului satul
   assembly-the A whole-theGen village-the

(ii) if the first constituent of the DP is variable (i.e., can take the inflectional morpheme), case-marking is obligatory as shown in (16) below:

(16)  

a. familia fiecărri elev
   family-the everyGen pupil
   The family of every pupil.

b. lectura unei cărți
   reading-the aGen booksGen
   The reading of a book.

However, there is a small number of constituents that may allow both case-marking (see the examples in (17) below) and a-marking (see the examples in (18) below):

(17)  

a. familiile câtorva elevi
   families-the someGen pupils
   The families of some pupils.

b. adăugarea unui pic de zahăr
   addition-the aGen little of sugar
   The addition of a little quantity of sugar.

(18)  

a. familiile a câtiva elevi
   families-the A some pupils
The families of some pupils.

b. adăugarea a un pic de zahăr (apud Giurgea (work in progress))
   addition-the A a little of sugar
   The addition of a little quantity of sugar.

2.2 DPs marked for Dative and PPs headed by la

As it has been shown in (14) above, nominal constituents marked with Dative may alternate with PPs headed by the functional preposition la.

This alternation observes the same constrains as the ones examined in the previous section:

   (i) if the first constituent of the DP is invariable, prepositional marking with la is obligatory (19):

(19)  

   a. am dat (diplome) la doi elevi have givePastPart diplomas LA two pupils I have given diplomas to two pupils.
   b. m-am adresat la tot satul meRefI-have addressed pastPart LA whole village-the I spoke to the whole village.
   c. s-a opus la ceea ce s-a spus mai devreme sRefI-has opposePastPart LA what sRefI-has sayPastPart more early (S)he opposed to what has been said earlier.

   (ii) if the first constituent of the DP is variable, case-marking is obligatory (20):

(20)  

   a. am dat (diplome) unui elev have givePastPart diplomas aDat pupil I gave diplomas to a pupil.
   b. m-am adresat întregului sat meRefI-have addressed entire-theDat village I spoke to the whole village.
   c. s-a opus tuturor lucrurilor spuse mai devreme sRefI-has opposePastPart allDat things-theDat saidFemPl more early (S)he opposed to all the things said earlier.

Notice that a limited number of constituents may allow both case-marking (see the examples in (21) below) and la-marking (see the examples in (22) below):

(21)  

   a. a telefonat câtorva colegi has phonePastPart someDat colleagues (S)he called some colleagues.
   b. a acordat premii fiecărui elev has awardPastPart prices everyDat pupil (S)he gave prices to every pupil.

(22)  

   a. a telefonat la câţiva colegi has phonePastPart LA some Dat colleagues (S)he called some colleagues.
   b. ??a acordat premii la fiecare elev has awardPastPart LA every pupil
(S)he gave prizes to every pupil.

### 2.3 Towards a generalisation

In the light of the data examined above, we can now tempt to propose the following generalisation with respect to case-marking of DPs (i.e. nouns having a D) in Romanian:

(23) a. *DPs having a variable constituent on the first position are morphologically case-marked*;
b. *DPs having an invariable constituent on the first position are prepositionally case marked.*

### 3 Case-marking and prepositional-marking of NPs

#### 3.1 The data

As illustrated in the examples (12) above, adnominal constituents marked with Genitive systematically alternate with PPs headed by the functional preposition *de*.

This phenomenon appears with several types of nouns: relational nouns (24a), deverbal nouns (24b), picture nouns (24c), object denoting nouns (24d):

(24) a. fiul *regelui* vs. fiul *de rege*
    - son-the king-Ge
    - The son of the king.
    - son-the DE king
    - The royal son.

    b. construirea *caselor* vs. construirea *de case*
    - building-the houses-Ge
    - The building of the houses.
    - building-the DE houses
    - The houses building.

    c. fotografía *grupului* vs. fotografía *de grup*
    - picture-the group-Ge
    - The picture of the group.
    - picture-the DE group
    - The group’s picture.

    d. ușa *bisericii* vs. ușa *de biserică*
    - door-the church-Ge
    - The door of the church.
    - door-the DE church
    - The church’s door.

Both types of construction express similar (lexical) semantic values: alienable possession (25a), inalienable possession (25b), human relationship (25c), goal (25d), content (25e), location (25f), time (25g):

(25) a. curtea *împăratului* / curtea *de împărat*
    - court-the emperor-Ge
    - The court of the emperor.
    - court-the DE emperor

    b. gulerul *cămășii* / gulerul *de cămășă*
    - collar-the shirts-Ge
    - The collar of the shirt.
    - collar-the DE shirt

    c. nepotul *unchiului* / nepotul *de unchi*
    - nephew-the uncle-Ge
    - The nephew of the uncle.
    - nephew-the DE uncle

    d. camera *oaspeților* / camera *de oaspeții*
    - room-the guests-Ge
    - The room of the guests.
    - room-the DE guests
The guests’ room.
e. ostrovul florilor  /  ostrovul de flori  
isle-the flowers-theGen  isle-the DE flowers  
The isle of the flowers.
f. aerul muntelui  /  aerul de munte  
air-the mountain-theGen  air-the DE mountain  
The mountain air.
g. căldura verii  /  căldura de vară  
heat-the summers-theGen  heat-the DE summer  
The summer heat.

3.2 Formal constraints

It is important to point out that the two types of adnominal constituents mentioned above obey to different formal constraints than the ones examined in § 2:

(i) adnominal constituents marked with Genitive are necessarily nouns with a determiner:

(26) a. fiul regelui  /  fiul unui rege  
son-the king-theGen  son-the aGen king  
The king’ s son.

b. *fiul rege  
son-the king

(ii) in contrast, adnominal constituents marked with de are necessarily nouns without determiner, regardless of its nature (27a), but can have (adjectival or prepositional) modifiers (27b-c):

(27) a. *fiul de regele  /  *fiul de un rege  
son-the DE king-the  son-the DE a king  
The son of a king.

b. fiul de rege african  
son-the DE king African
The African royal son.

c. construirea de case din lemn  
building-the DE houses of wood  
The wooden houses building.

In other words, adnominal constituents marked with Genitive are full nominal expressions (i.e., DPs), while adnominal de-marked constituents are incomplete nominal expressions (i.e., NPs).

3.3 Idiomatic expressions

There are exceptions to the free substitution between the constructions with morphological Genitive and the constructions with the preposition de, namely compounds.

On the one hand, there are constructions taking only the Genitive-marking and disallowing de-marking. The following paradigm illustrates this possibility:

(28) a. floarea soarelui  /  *floarea de soare  
flower-the sun-theGen  flower-the DE sun
Sunflower.

b. regina noptii vs. *regina de noapte
queen-the nights-theGen
A night flower smelling good.

c. iarba dracului vs. *iarba de drac
grass-the devil-theGen
Weeds.

d. mana Maicii Domnului vs. *mana de Maica Domnului
hand-the Mother-theGen God-theGen
Some king of flower smelling good.

On the other hand, there are constructions – such as the ones illustrated in (29) below – taking only the de-marking and disallowing Genitive-marking:

(29) a. floarea de colt vs. *floarea coltului
flower-the DE corner
Edelweiss.

b. laptele de pasare vs. *laptele pasarii
milk-the DE bird
A cake made with eggs and milk.

c. dintele de lapte vs. *dintele laptelui
tooth-the DE milk
Milk tooth.

As in the case of the systematic alternations (see the previous sections), the choice between case-marking and de-marking for compounds is strictly correlated to the categorial status of the adnominal constituent. More precisely, DPs are case-marked, while NPs are de-marked.

However, since we are dealing with idiomatic constructions, we may be tempted to think that the choice of one or another type of marking depends on extralinguistic factors.

Indeed, nominal expressions referring to kinds or to unique entities (such as the sun, the devil, the Virgin Mary) are generally realized as DPs (i.e., nouns with the definite article), hence case-marking occurs.

In contrast, nominal expressions referring to non unique entities (such as birds, corners, milk) may be realized as NPs, hence de-marking occurs.

3.4 Towards a generalisation

The data examined in this section allow us to propose the following revisited generalisation:

(30) a. An adnominal nominal projection is (morphologically) case-marked if it is a DP with a variable constituent on the first position (cf. (23a) above);

b. An adnominal nominal projection is (prepositionally) marked by de if it is an NP.

3.5 Syntactic structure and interpretation

The contrast described above between case-marking of DPs and prepositional marking of NPs may be represented in a twofold manner.

From a syntactic point of view, the following representations may be proposed:
The structure given in (31) differs from the one in (32) with respect to the categorial nature of the embedded constituent: PPs headed by a so-called „functional” preposition in (31) and DPs carrying the inflectional morpheme in (32).

They also differ from a semantic point of view: while in the constructions with Genitive the head N denotes a relation between two individuals (the one denoted by DP₁ and the one denoted by DP₂) (see Beyssade & Dobrovie-Sorin (2005)), in prepositionally marked constructions, the head N denotes a relation between an individual (denoted by DP₁) and a property (denoted by NP₂) (see Kolliakou (1999), Mardale (2007)).

In old Romanian, as well as in some contemporary regional dialects, there are constructions in which adnominal *de*-constituents may have an <e>-type denotation. Note however that in that case, *de* introduces a DP headed by the indefinite article (not a NP):

(A)  
  a.  c-or fi pierdut urma d-o căprioară (apud TDR: 258)  
      that-AUX_PAST_COND be lost track-the DE-aFEM.SG deer  
      … that (s)he would lost the track of a deer  
  b.  o coadă de un topor (apud TDR: 372)  
      aFEM.SG handle DE anMASC.SG axe  
      a handle of an axe

3.6 Distributional constraints

The correlations established in the previous sections explain a number of distributional constraints. In what follows, we will examine these constraints.

3.6.1 Distribution in predicate position\(^1\) (cf. Milner (1982))

Adnominal constituents marked with Genitive case cannot appear after the copula:

(33)  
  a.  *fiul este regelui  
      son-the is king-theGen  
  b.  *fotografia este grupului  
      picture-the is group-theGen  
  c.  *ușa este bisericii  
      door-the is churches-theGen

In order for them to appear after the copula, we need to insert the so-called genitive article *al*, *a*, *ai*, *ale* (made up of the preposition *a* followed by the definite article) in front of the Genitive DP:

\(^1\) By predicate position we understand post-copular position.
In contrast, we can observe that *de*-marked constituents can appear after the copula (35):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(35) a. } & \text{ fiul este de rege (nu de sclav)} \\
& \text{son-the DE king (not DE slave)} \\
& \text{This is a royal son (not a slave son).} \\
\text{b. } & \text{ ușa este de biserică (nu de casă)} \\
& \text{door-the DE church (not DE house)} \\
& \text{This is a church door (not a house door).}
\end{align*}
\]

### 3.6.2 Alternance with APs

Certain *de*-marked constituents may alternate with an AP (36), while Genitive-marked constituents may not do so:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(36) a. } & \text{ fiul de rege } \rightarrow \text{ fiul regal} \\
& \text{son-the DE king} \\
& \text{son-the royal Adj} \\
& \text{The royal son.} \\
\text{b. } & \text{ ușa de biserică } \rightarrow \text{ ușa bisericească} \\
& \text{door-the DE church} \\
& \text{door-the church Adj} \\
& \text{The ecclesiastic door.}
\end{align*}
\]

### 3.6.3 Alternation with pronouns

Adnominal constituents marked with Genitive case may alternate with personal pronouns (which are equally marked with Genitive case):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(37) a. } & \text{ fiul regelui } \rightarrow \text{ fiul lui} \\
& \text{son-the king-theGen} \\
& \text{son-the himGen} \\
& \text{The king’s son.} \\
& \text{His son.} \\
\text{b. } & \text{ ușa bisericii } \rightarrow \text{ ușa ei} \\
& \text{door-the church-theGen} \\
& \text{door-the herGen} \\
& \text{The door of the church.} \\
& \text{Its door.}
\end{align*}
\]

In contrast, *de*-marked constituents cannot alternate with personal pronouns.

### 3.6.4 Anaphora

The complement of *de*-marked constituents cannot serve as anaphoric antecedents for another DP (38). In other words, *de*-marked constituents are not referential. For instance, in (38a) the relative *care “thay”* cannot refer to the adnominal constituent (*de*) *rege “royal”* since the latter denoted a quality (i.e. a property) and not an individual. In this sense, compare the construction given in (38a) with the one in (38b):
(38) a. *El este fiul de [rege], pe care țânăra speră să îl întâlnească.
   he is son-the DE [king], PE_Acc which_i youngwoman-the hopes that him_i meet
b. El este [fiul de rege], pe care țânăra speră să îl întâlnească.
   he is [son-the DE king], PE_Acc which_i youngwoman-the hopes that him_i meet
   He is the royal son that the youngwoman hopes to meet.

In constrast, the adnominal constituents marked with Genitive may serve as antecedents for anaphoric pronouns since the Genitive marked constituents denote individuals (see (39)). In other words, constituents marked with Genitive are referential:

(39) a. i. El este fiul regelui pe care țânăra speră să îl întâlnească. (ambiguous)
   he is son-the king-the_gen PE_Acc which_i youngwoman-the hopes to him_i meet
   He is the son of the king that the youngwoman hopes to meet.
ii. El este fiul [regelui], pe care țânăra speră să îl întâlnească.
   he is son-the [king-the_gen], PE_Acc which_i youngwoman-the hopes to him_i meet
iii. El este [fiul regelui], pe care țânăra speră să îl întâlnească.
   he is [son-the king-the_gen], PE_Acc which_i youngwoman-the hopes that him_i meet
b. i. Ea este fiica [profesorului], pe care i-am văzut ieri. (non ambiguous)
   she is daughter-the teacher-the_gen PE_Acc which_i him_CL_i has see_pastpart yesterday
   She is the daughter of the teacher that I saw yesterday.
ii. Ea este [fiica profesorului], pe care i-am văzut-o ieri.
   she is [daughter-the teacher-the_gen], PE_Acc which_j has see_pastpart-her_CL_j yesterday
   She is the daughter of the teacher that I saw yesterday.

3.7 To sum up

The following table summarizes the results of this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Genitive-marked constituents</th>
<th>adnominal de-marked constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>have a D(eterminer)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denote properties</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can appear in predicate position</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can alternate with APs</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can alternate with pronouns</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be antecedents for anaphoric pronouns</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Conclusion

The constructions analyzed here are alike insofar as they involve a relation (which may either pertain to the lexical meaning of the head N or else be contextually triggered by the presence of the second argument).

They differ regarding the nature of the second argument: a strong correlation can be shown to exist between syntactic categories (DPs vs. NPs), Case marking (morphological vs. prepositional) and semantic type (type <e> vs. type <e, t>).

5 Selected references